## Current Research

# Introduction

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Why would there be a special issue of DSQ on deafness? We would like to suggest that the answers to this question deal with the ways in which deafness is a different type of physical impairment and the fact that there is a deaf culture and a deaf community which are separate and different from disability culture and the disability community. While there are some areas of overlap, there are larger areas in which deafness does not overlap with other impairments and the deaf community does not overlap with the disability community. There are also large areas of controversy within the deaf community itself which do not parallel controversies in the disability community. Finally, there is the attempt by some in the deaf community to frame deafness not as a disability issue at all but as a linguistic/diversity issue.

Our goal for this special issue was to bring together a variety of scholars working in the field of deaf studies and deaf education who could illuminate both the ways in which deafness is similar to and different from other disability groups. In introducing this issue, we want to share with our DSQ colleagues some information which we feel provides a framework for reading the pieces which follow.

Let us begin by considering "who deaf people are." Many definitional problems exist in this area. The majority of people who are audiologically hard of hearing or deaf are over age 70, because the incidence of hearing impairments (like the incidence of visual impairments) increases with age. However, the most vocal deaf people are those who were born deaf or who became deaf before age 18 (called pre-vocationally deaf). These are the people most likely to consider themselves to be culturally Deaf. (People who consider themselves to be culturally deaf indicate so by the use of the capital D--and sometimes even call themselves "capital D Deaf.") People who are culturally deaf are not distinguished by the level of their hearing loss but by their cultural identification with the deaf community. (See the article on Deaf Culture by Barbara White for more on this.)

The deaf community has a long history of newspapers and organizations which began in the late 1880's, although geographical deaf communities existed before that. Frequently located near state residential schools, which were to some extent controlled by the deaf adults who taught in them until 1880, these communities tended to have clubs, sports, and other forms of association which did not exist in the disability community which, in fact, can only recently be said to have become a community.

However, the deaf community has one feature (shared only with the gay and disability communities) which makes it different than "traditional" (i.e. racial or ethnic) minority communities--most members are not born into the community. Because fewer than 10% of deaf children come from families with deaf parents, most deaf children join this community later in life,

and their socialization into this community does not come primarily or initially from their families. Instead, they are socialized into the community through contact with deaf peers and adult role models. (See the discussion by Kay Meadow-Orlans on family.) It is therefore not surprising that the residential schools came to play a critical role in the development and maintenance of deaf culture and deaf community, and this explains in part the current controversy over mainstreaming for deaf students.

However, not all people with hearing impairments are members of the deaf community. Many prefer to socialize mostly or exclusively with hearing people and reject the notion that they are members of a minority culture.

This fundamental difference in perspective has been reflected in several debates among deaf people as well as between the deaf community and teachers and helping professionals such as audiologists or speech therapists. One debate is the historical schism between those who favored lipreading and speaking (called oralists), and those who supported signing (called manualists). The other debate is over whether deaf children should be educated with their deaf peers in separate programs or included in mainstream schools with hearing students. (For more on schooling see the article by Michael Stinson.)

Additionally, the deaf community is split into (at least) strong proponents of ASL and deaf culture, who call themselves Deaf, those hard-of hearing people who do not support signing, and the largest group of people with hearing impairments--people who are late deafened and who do not identify with either group. (See the discussion of identity issues in the article by R. Greg Emerton). When further ethnic and racial cultural groups are considered, e.g. deaf African Americans or deaf Latino Americans, the complexity of identity and diversity within the deaf community expands almost exponentially. (See the article by Glen Anderson for more on this).

Sometimes the diverse perspectives represented by the various subgroups of deaf persons are reflected in a particular event or theme. For example, some technical and medical developments have come to symbolize the distinction between culturally Deaf persons and those hard-of-hearing or late-deafened persons who do not support or use signing. Culturally Deaf persons are most likely to define deafness as a linguistic issue, and deaf persons as a linguistic community. Hard-of-hearing or late deafened persons are more likely to view deafness as a functional impairment or limitation, one which they may seek to rehabilitate or even to cure. When viewed from the perspective of the culturally Deaf, technology, including hearing aids, and procedures such as cochlear implants are perceived as a grossly invasive and, in the most extreme cases, a form of cultural genocide. To those who seek to increase their residual hearing, however, improved hearing aids and cochlear implants are welcome scientific advancements. Thus a culturally Deaf person who considers an implant (perhaps because of decreased vision) must also consider the social consequences of this action, namely, rejection by the Deaf community. (See the piece on cochlear implants by John Christiansen for more on this controversial procedure.)

Two inter-related issues which are important for deaf people are educational and occupational status. Until the last 20 years or so, the majority of deaf children were educated in segregated, usually residential, deaf schools. Because the oralist philosophy dominated deaf education until about 1970, these schools tended to spend more time teaching speech and lipreading skills than they did teaching regular content areas such as history or math. Deaf children who graduated from these programs tended to have low levels of reading and writing skill. To some extent changes have been reflected in two recent trends. One is the fact that the majority of deaf children are now educated in mainstreamed programs, usually in public schools, often (but not always) with sign interpreters and note-takers. The other trend is an increased emphasis on using signing in the residential schools although the signing is not always actual ASL but some variety of an ASL-English

mixture.

Both because of their lack of oral skills and lower reading levels, pre-vocationally deaf people historically worked in very few occupations--principally printing or mail sorting in post offices, for men, and working in factories doing sewing, for women. Recently these patterns have changed. Deaf men are still more likely than hearing men to be blue collar workers but they are much more likely to be in white collar jobs than they were in the past (Barnartt, 1997; Barnartt and Christiansen, 1996). Deaf women's occupational changes have followed those of hearing women; both groups are most likely to be white collar workers. Evidence about incomes is somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, older evidence suggests that prevocationally deaf workers earn less than hearing workers. On the other hand, recent evidence suggests that the incomes of people with hearing impairments (of varying severity levels and ages of onset) are actually higher than those of their hearing counterparts (Barnartt and Altman, 1997).

However, occupational and socio-economic issues remain for deaf people, especially pre-lingually and pre-vocationally deaf people. As the article by Watson and Boone shows, changes in the structure of the labor force is likely to present some problems, especially for less educated deaf workers--although they may present some opportunities, also.

The deaf community has been radicalized in recent years in much the same way that the disability community has, although the issues are somewhat different. Issues for the deaf community include retention and control of deaf schools and communications accessibility above that which was mandated by the ADA including, for example, captioned videos. Two issues which have emerged recently (again, paralleling events in the disability community) are the need for research into deafness which begins with a Deaf cultural perspective and the need for deaf studies programs. The article by R. Greg Emerton and Karen Christie discusses the former issue, which manifests itself in questions about who can or should do research about deafness and deaf people. The article by Arlene Kelly, who is herself a professor in one of the few deaf studies department in the country, discusses some of the historical and epistemological issues raised by the field of deaf studies.

It was our plan that each of the pieces in this issue would follow a common pattern. As a result, we asked contributors to consider the following three questions as they prepared their articles. First, what are the major debates in this area? Second, what is the state of research or knowledge in this area? And third, what are the unresolved or unresearched issues that should be considered for the future? We thank our authors for working within these guidelines. We feel that in doing this, they have provided a basic warp upon which the various topics reviewed are woven, thus facilitating the discovery of ways in which deafness is both like and unlike other physical impairments.

In closing, we thank David Pfeiffer for inviting us to edit this issue, and Richard Scotch for his patience and persistence in getting the issue to press and out to the DSQ readers. We would also like to thank Elaine Makas for coordinating the book review section. We hope this special issue will generate some interesting discussions among our DSQ colleagues and look forward to continuing this conversation in person or via e-mail. Please feel free to contact us with your reactions, questions, and comments. Sharon can be reached at barnartt@juno.com and Sue at sbfnis@rit.edu.

References

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